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ABSTRACT

This paper describes individualized learning, a form of individualized instruction that emphasizes students' self-paced learning progress within a tutorial teaching structure, as it was used in a freshman composition program. The teachers first determined the composition skills that their students should have acquired upon completion of the three required courses, and then they organized their teaching and testing materials in a unit mastery sequence. Placement tests established the starting point for each student within the required sequence. The classroom environment was an open assembly area with a separate testing room, allowing informal, one-to-one student/teacher conferences that stressed learning rather than testing. Grading was based on quality instead of quantity; students progressed to another instructional unit only after showing adequate performance in the previous unit. Two surveys--one of student responses after course completion, the other from achievement test results--indicate that this individualized learning approach is a successful method of compostion instruction. (RL)

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# INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Kathleen Proia

In 1972 at the 4C's in Boston, Mr. Robert Blackwood introduced to the members a resolution on Individualized Instruction. In this resolution a number of assumptions were made concerning individualized instruction, most of which pointed to one inescapable fact: There is obviously a great diversity of opinion as to the meaning of the term, individualized instruction. No one seems to be sure just what it means. The word individualized, by itself, sounds idyllic. Any program structured to suit the needs of each individual must have something going for it; yet it seems that this term, individualized instruction, is sometimes being used to mask a confrontation between man and machine. Or, more accurately, between student and machine. Large skills centers have been set up in which students progress, along with their machines, through a series of programmed modules, until they both reach a pre-determined goal. Well, mechanized this may be, yet is it individualized? I don't think so. At least, it's not individualized according to my definition. To me individualization must imply an emphasis on the individual and on individual differences. How can any machine respond to these differences except by indicating that an answer is either right or wrong? Only an instructor, through close association with a student, can do both--indicate the accuracy of an answer and adapt his instruction to the method which will best help each individual student learn. No, individualized learning--notice, I said individualized learning, not instruction,--must involve a student-teacher relationship.

And since the goal of every English teacher is to help his students learn what they need to know for success later in college and in life, let's consider individualized learning.

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Individualized learning takes place best when there is a one-to-one relationship. By that I mean on student to one teacher, not one student to one machine. And with that teacher the student works, to him the student is responsible, and with him the student learns. To give a brief definition, then, true individualization is essentially a giant tutorial system, using qualified English instructors as tutors.

Too idealistic, you say? Impractical? Impossible? No! It can be done, and it has. I know because I, along with some colleagues, have designed, developed, and initiated such an individualized program at my college, Strayer College, in Washington, D.C.

Why did we try individualization? My department, like those of so many other colleges, had found that over the past few years entering students have come to college with great ranges in preparation for college English courses. Though some seemed to have had excellent preparation, an increasing number had high school backgrounds which left them totally unprepared for college English. In deed, some of them had even graduated from high school with functioning levels in English that tested below second grade level. And with these increasingly heterogeneous students, the traditional classroom approach seemed to reach fewer students with its shotgun approach to learning. The majority of the students were merely frustrated, learning little, and we were forced to try new methods. First, a track system--remedial classes, regular classes, honors classes. Yet that was not so successful as we had hoped. The remedial students were suffering from the stigma of "dum-dum" English, and each quarter fewer entering students qualified for even the regular classes. Next, we tried programming, then workshops. And although each of these methods had some good points, there was one deficiency common to all. None of

these approaches helped all our students. Some, but not all.

In 1970 we began to individualize our English classes. The first issue we faced was how. How is a real individualized program set up? Initially it was necessary to determine the skills we wanted our students to master in freshman English. What grammatical and writing competencies did we want them to master by the end of freshman English? For our courses we decided that the students should be able to write standard English, using acceptable grammar and punctuation; they had to be able to write descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative paragraphs and compositions; and they needed to be able to write research papers. With these goals in mind, we next determined the steps that one would have to take to achieve these goals. Thus, working backwards, we wrote our program, including text, tests, re-tests, voluminous exercises, and many reinforcement exercises to be used by students whose weak backgrounds require them to have extra help in mastering the courses' competencies. The structure of our program allows students with strong backgrounds to move through the material rapidly, in giant steps, and at the same time, provides weaker students with minute steps toward reaching these same goals. These programs we wrote, I might add, are now three textbooks, one for each of our three English courses, and are being published by Burgess Company in Minneapolis.

It is at this point that one major characteristic of true individualization becomes apparent Such a program should be structured to fit the goals of specific courses within a college. Each college, then, may design as an individualized program to suit its goals

With the program developed and materials written, the next step was effectualization. We administered two placement examinations to all entering freshman. One exam is a standardized test, and the other is

a writing exam which I composed to test the writing level of each student against the level required by the end of our first freshman English course, Written Communications I. Any student who passes both parts of the placement test is exempt from Written Communications I and automatically placed in Written Communications II. All other American students, regardless of their test results, begin at the same level, the beginning of Written Communications I. Thus, we had eliminated any remedial non-credit English courses and any negative attitudes attached to them. So, all students begin at the same place, but from the first day, the students move at completely individual rates, and by the end of just one week of classes, there are virtually no two students at the same point in the course.

To impress upon the students the importance of their making progress, however, regardless of the difference of pace, we do require students to attend class each day the class meets. And each day we check their progress, working with each student on a one-to-one basis, giving them help, advice, and encouragement as they go along.

In order to achieve this tutorial structure, our classes are limited to fifteen students to one instructor This very low student to teacher ratio permits the one-to-one relationship of each meeting.

Atmosphere, too, is an important issue, so we moved out of the classrooms and are now conducting all freshman English classes in a large, open assembly area, where all day there are students working with their instructors at tables, not desks, and the aura of "working on English" is most contagious.

The logistics of such individualization form another issue. First, there is the issue of grading. How does one grade the slower-moving student so that he is not penalized for his weak background? And at the same time, how can achievement still be evaluated? This problem we solved by grading on the quality of work produced, not on the speed with which it is produced.

When a student completes all requirements for a course, he is given a grade, not before. If he finishes by the end of a quarter, fine. He gets his English grade just as he gets any other grade. Yet if the end of the quarter arrives and he has not yet finished, he is not penalized by receiving an F or an Incomplete; instead, he is given a grade of IP--meaning in progress. On the day he does finish the course requirements, regardless of when in a given quarter this may occur, he gets his grade, and the same day is enrolled in the next required English course. In this way he wastes no time, yet is not penalized by working more slowly than some other students might. Also, the faster-moving, not bored by being held back as many may be in a traditional class, may complete all three courses in fewer than three quarters, so in this way they, too, have an advantage.

Concerning grading within a course: we require a minimum achievement level of C in all work produced by the students. Any modules in which a student achieves lower than a C must be re-studied, and he must be retested until he achieves this C level. And since we do not average grades in a given test, this means that upon completion of a unit each student has achieved at least C level in all areas covered. It is impossible for him to get an A in subject-verb agreement, an F in pronouns, and average a C on a grammar unit. He would have to repeat pronouns until he has mastered them to at least a C level. So under this system, a student is guaranteed that at the end of a course he has mastered all his requirements at at least a minimum level.

A second logistic difficulty may be tests. In a specimen class of seven students, there are usually students in Written Communications I, Written Communications II, and Written Communications III, all working at different paces. For this reason it is most unlikely that all students

would be ready to take a test at the same time. Therefore, we have set up a testing room, staffed by a testing room supervisor, where all English students go to take the tests they are ready for. The testing room is open all hours the college is open, so a student may take a test during his free time and not waste an English class by taking a test. Naturally, the testing room supervisor only administers tests; she never grades them. Each student's instructor grades all work he has done and goes over the tests with the student in his next assigned English class period. As you can see, then, the instructor becomes intimately familiar with each student's progress and/or problems, so he can better help the student learn what he needs to know. And with individualization the instructor, too, is able to learn the individual differences of his students so that he can adapt his instruction to the way in which a student learns best, whether it be by hearing, by seeing, or by practicing. For each student, then, the instructor may use a different approach, an approach based on the individual's needs--an individualized approach.

Does all this really work? Are the results really better under this kind of system? Wanting an answer to this question, I last year conducted two surveys. The first was a questionnaire, completed by students as they finished all requirements for all three courses. The results, unslanted by hopes of better grades through positive comments, were especially encouraging. The students cited in particular their delight at the very close student-teacher relationship inherent in this kind of individualized system. They actually felt an obligation to their teachers since the two of them had been working so closely together, and they didn't want to disappoint their teachers. They realized their instructors were concerned for them and eager to help them master the requirements. In turn, the

students made sincere efforts to work harder and make that progress expected of them.

Statistically, too, the results were encouraging. My second survey was conducted on the basis of the results of Stanford tests. These tests were administered to entering students, then again to the same students eight weeks later. According to the results of these tests, the average student increased his working level of English one and one-half years in just eight weeks. I guess the only people more delighted with these results than the instructors were the students themselves. For many of them, they felt that for the first time in English class, they were really learning. And they liked it.

Naturally, in any system, and individualization is no exception, there are advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is exhaustion--although class load is small, I and the members of my English department do find it more tiring to teach an individualized class than a traditional one. And, since we still need extra faculty to take care of all the students in these three required courses, the administration finds it necessary to hire more instructors in English than in any other field. I am chairman of our English department at Strayer, and for a student body of under 2,000, we have about 26 very dedicated members in our department.

Yet the advantages are, in my opinion, far greater than the disadvantages. Most of the advantages I have mentioned above. But all the advantages can be summarized thusly: For the first time, with individualization, we are sure that we are helping every one of our students learn. There can be few advantages more important than this one.